

# AN UNDECLARED TRIBALISM IN 'AUSTRALIAN' SONICS

Ian Shanahan, October 1996.

Postwest Vol.3 No.2 pp.9–10, June 1997.

For some enlightened members of our species, the imminent dawning of a new millennium augured an era of peace and unity. Lamentably, however, this Utopian vision of hope has been well and truly shattered by certain historic events of the last decade that demonstrate humankind's capacity for atavistic backsliding towards old internecine tribalisms and concepts of nationhood: (civil) warfare in various regions of the world, galvanized by religious, political, geographical, ethnic, and material differences. 'Culture' has not been spared; its fragmentation in the West accelerates. Individuals remain alienated, and the 'other' is alive and well – insofar as differences still take precedence over commonalities. (And yet ... this is *not* a plea for monoculture.) What follows is a brief discussion – a thumbnail sketch which is, as far as I am aware, the first public critique – of such a tribal phenomenon within the microcosm of local sound-art.



In **The Sydney Morning Herald** recently,<sup>1</sup> there appeared an article about the Adelaide musician and academic Graeme Koehne, in which Koehne expressed views that are representative of a paradoxical trend in current Australian composition. This trend is grounded in a desire to immunize Australian (art) music against European influences, in particular "the modernist style":

"Students come along and they're writing these very dreary, dissonant, drab pieces as though they're survivors from a prisoner-of-war camp", [Koehne] says. "I think the modernist style was influenced by these incredibly dark European ideas of angst-ridden expressionism. Even though this has nothing to do with most Australian students' life experiences and culture, there is this guilt there. They feel they must take on this heavy cloak in order to be taken seriously".<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, modernism, I am astonished to learn, is a *European style* – and there's only one of them. Silly me: I thought there was more to it than that... In any event, to appeal to such superficial attributes as 'style' and 'geography' in order to form a distinction seems problematic to me, because one could argue that what is really being stigmatized here are European musical traditions (and in particular, the intellectual lineage of modernism) which are deeply rooted in the notion of *unity*. Consider, for example, the *quadrivium* of the Middle Ages – wherein *musica*, *astrologia* (astronomy), *geometria* and *arithmetica* were disciplines studied as facets of a unified cosmology. Such holistic thinking led to Renaissance (and modern) theories about music/vibration as the underpinning of reality itself: recall the 'world monochord' depicted by the 17th-century English polymath Robert Fludd, in which harmonics and Pythagorean musical intervals – not necessarily manifested as acoustical phenomena – are equivalent to numerical ratios whereby a hierarchical universe is organized.<sup>3</sup> Koehne's polemic can therefore be viewed, ultimately, as a railing against interdisciplinary investigations, and a dismissal of an integrated, holistic view of the cosmos: a tribal diatribe in support of adversarial dualisms.

So, where is the paradox in the abovementioned trend? Where is the 'undeclared' tribalism? Aside from the fact that most of those composers who adhere to this 'Europhobia' profess to being staunchly postmodern (i.e. pluralistic: potentially open to any style or influence), their attempts to nurture distinctly Australian voices instead often entail a blatant embracing of American ideas and values.

Without passing any judgement on American culture, I will simply provide some variegated evidence of its sway here:

1. The repetitive-process musics of American composers such as Steve Reich, Philip Glass and Terry Riley have been influential in motivating many Australians to become dyed-in-the-wool minimalists

(e.g. Michael Atherton, Robert Lloyd, Mark Pollard, Nigel Sabin, Martin Wesley-Smith, Robert Davidson).

2. Our orchestral composition is now being overwhelmed with musical formulas straight out of Hollywood: one only has to listen to the orchestral music of (say) Carl Vine, Richard Mills, Nigel Westlake, or Brenton Broadstock. And Graeme Koehne, in the cited newspaper article,<sup>4</sup> expressly draws attention to the importance of American film music in his work:

Described as a perpetuum mobile for large orchestra, [Koehne's **Powerhouse**] was inspired by Raymond Scott's 1937 composition of the same name – a work used extensively by [Carl] Stalling in his [Warner Brothers' **Looney Tunes**] cartoon scores of the 1940s and 1950s.

3. Within the concert hall, various American vernacular musics are being exploited by many local soundsmiths. For instance: disco, 'techno' and Elvis Presley inform much of Matthew Hindson's *oeuvre*.
4. Sound-sculpture and sound-installations – contexts for music-making found primarily in the U.S. – are increasingly popular here, in the work of artists such as Ros Bandt, Colin Offord, Ernie Althoff and Warren Burt.
5. Philosophies of gender have, of course, flourished in American society and academe; they largely originated there. Encouraged by feminist musicologists like Susan McClary and Sally Macarthur, feminist issues are spotlighted explicitly in ideological pieces (perhaps we should label them 'genderphonics') by Australian composers such as Moya Henderson, Sheila Learmonth, Becky Llewellyn and Hazel Smith.
6. In Australia, there is a proliferation of 'New Age' musics (e.g. those of Sarah Hopkins and Ken Davis) which may well be connected to the influence of Californian New Age world-views upon Australian society.

Lastly, and alas: isn't there a capitulation here, during these economic-rationalist times, to the American standard of 'artistic excellence' ... that a piece of music is just a commodity whose 'success' can be gauged only by its prominence in the marketplace (number of bucks earned, or posteriors on seats)?

It seems to me that for some of our composers, the defining factor of Australian culture is merely stylistic/geographical: a rejection of things European (while becoming an American clone). But for others – like Colin Bright, Bruce Cale, Peter Sculthorpe, Anne Boyd, and Ross Edwards – perhaps a 'deeper cartography' is at work, wherein musics-of-this-place are being forged without a rejection of anything *per se* ... except, maybe, 'X-centricity'.

Personally, among creative Australians, I await a closer examination of (and debate about) such paradoxes involving exclusionary postmodernist visions of 'Australianness' that fail to address the ongoing Americanization of our cultural landscape.

## Endnotes

1. Kelly Burke: "Old 'toon tune fuels creative impulse", **The Sydney Morning Herald**, October 11, 1996, p.16.
2. *ibid*.
3. Robert Fludd: **Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris, metaphysica, physica atque technica historia**, Oppenheim/Frankfurt, 1617-1621.
4. Burke, *op cit*.

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